# **Expanding the Boundaries of Political Activism**

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**Introduction**

The aim of this article is to move away from the myth of passivity to counteract the objectification of South Asian women. Through the narratives of women active in Asian women's organizations it will show that a broader version of political activism is brought into play. This article will also demonstrate that despite being constructed as subjects without agency, South Asian women have been politically active, even under the most oppressive circumstances. As bell hooks comments:

Even in the worse circumstances of domination, the ability to manipulate one's gaze in the face of structures of domination, that would contain it, opens up the possibility of agency […] Spaces of agency exist for black people, wherein we can both interrogate the gaze of the Other but also look back, and at one another, naming what we see[[1]](#endnote-1).

The ‘spaces of agency’ and looking ‘at one another’ for South Asian women have been constructed through the existence of women's organizations and women's specific roles in different types of organizations. Any awareness of South Asian women organizing politically is based on knowledge related to the existence of high-profile secular organizations such as Southall Black Sisters (SBS), with the recent media coverage of forced marriage and honour killings serving to heighten the profile of SBS further[[2]](#endnote-2).

Although the conceptualization of agency remains a hotly debated issue in social theory[[3]](#endnote-3), this article will show, through research findings, South Asian women as active agents. Political agency has been described as being ‘created through situations and statuses conferred on them [subjects]’[[4]](#endnote-4). However, political agency also involves the capacity to make social change, to resist structural constraints, and to challenge racist and sexist discourses. Indeed, political agency can be shown to have many sites such as ‘race’, gender and religion, working in and against the stereotypes. Political agency can also be played out and expressed in a variety of antagonisms. Therefore, agency can be shown to unfold as multi-layered *and* infused with contradictions, ambiguities and ambivalences. The practices and experiences of political agency can develop through the micro politics of living a life. It is with this in mind that the following provides a starting point for this article by locating it within a particular set of discussions about political activism in recent feminist theory. It examines how the parameters of political activism relating to South Asian women can be redefined with an emphasis on multiple sites of political activism[[5]](#endnote-5). This article will interrogate concepts associated with feminism to highlight the debate between western feminists and black feminists and, in particular, the concepts ‘empowerment’ and ‘resistance’ will be examined to show how black feminists responded to oppressive mechanisms. What emerges is the proactive force of political agency at grassroots level that is evident in the narratives of the women interviewed.

**Feminism and political activism**

With particular reference to organizational forms of women's political activities it is necessary to examine changing feminist understandings of what constitutes ‘the political’. The parameters of political activism need to be broadened to incorporate forms of political activity that are not normally associated with visible electoral politics. The process of extending the parameters of what constitutes political activity is an important step towards the inclusion of black women's claim to political agency through their activism[[6]](#endnote-6). This paper argues that although the process whereby women (South Asian and black) have reclaimed ethnic identities in their pursuit of equality is complex, it does not necessarily have to be viewed negatively.

The public sphere has conventionally been thought of as the location of politics, whether it is through participation in political parties, trade unions or other forms of civic activities[[7]](#endnote-7). However, in relation to the first two categories, women are excluded to a greater extent from these activities than men. One example of this is the lesser representation of women in parliament in liberal democratic societies, such as Britain[[8]](#endnote-8). Exclusion from the male-dominated public political sphere is recognized by the UNDP in the following statement in 1993:

Women are the world's largest excluded group. Even though they make up half the adult population, and often contribute more than their share to society, inside and outside the home, they are frequently excluded from positions of power[[9]](#endnote-9).

With reference to the low participation of women in politics globally, UNIFEM launched a virtual network at the UN—the International Knowledge Network of Women in Politics (iKNOW Politics). The network was launched in February 2007 with a specific aim—to link women involved in politics globally. The need for such a resource illustrates that despite women's increasing role in formal politics, they remain under-represented and experience many obstacles on the road to participating fully. The Worldwide Guide to Women in Leadership gives the following statistics:

16.1% of members of national parliaments worldwide are women. Women hold 7.7% of the seats in Arab states' parliaments, 16.0% of the seats in sub-Saharan African states' parliaments, 16.8% of the seats in European states' parliaments, and 18.5% of the seats in American states' parliaments[[10]](#endnote-10).

If participation in formal structures is limited because of the dynamics of gender, not only is a broader understanding of political activity required but we also need to ask, for the purposes of this article, whether South Asian women face major obstacles to political activism because of the intersection of gender, racism and culture. The impact of this trajectory, referred to as ‘triple oppression’, has been highlighted by black feminists' response to western feminism[[11]](#endnote-11). Although black feminist thinking has developed in different directions over the last 30 years and ‘black’ as an identity is open to interpretation, it is important to retain the relevance of ‘black feminism’. This is expressed by Heidi Mirza in *Black British Feminism*:

[…] the political project [black feminism] has a single purpose: to excavate the silences and pathological appearances of a collectivity of women assigned as the ‘other’ and produced in a gendered, sexualized, wholly racialized discourse […] there have been many sites of struggle: migration, work, white feminist theory, and now identity and difference. If anything, what our struggles demonstrate is that you can have difference (polyvocality) within a conscious construction of sameness (i.e. black feminism)[[12]](#endnote-12).

 Therefore, ‘black feminism’, because of its concerns and approaches, offers a way to understand and analyse issues that are relevant to South Asian women and their participation in the public sphere. Black feminism also offers a possible reconceptualizing of the public sphere, and this article will draw on the work of black feminists (African-Caribbean and South Asian) since the seventies. Black feminism has been central to maintaining a fundamental challenge to mainstream feminism, particularly with reference to racialized social policy and legislation. The roles of sexism and racism are identified in Julia Sudbury's analysis of black women's political activism, where she claims that one of the obstacles to political activism is situated in ‘the role of sexism in structuring the dynamics within black communities’[[13]](#endnote-13). The importance of Sudbury's work is located in her critique of explanations that utilize culture as the main obstacle to participation in politics. Sudbury critiques the ways in which stereotypes are used for purposes of analysis. Racialized sexism is also evident in historical accounts of the experiences of black women[[14]](#endnote-14).

If, as Sudbury argues, the dynamics within black communities impact on the political activism of women, there is evidence to suggest that within the parameters of community politics, political agency has indeed been conceptualized as masculine and the role of women unacknowledged[[15]](#endnote-15). Similarly, feminists more generally have been slow in their recognition of the ‘thorny issue’ of black women's political agency. In community politics, although South Asian women have participated in community campaigns concerned with racism and injustices of the criminal justice system, they have often encountered difficulties within a ‘macho atmosphere around everything political’[[16]](#endnote-16). The legacy in which ‘the political’ is defined as inherently masculine has been one powerful factor behind the designation of South Asian women as passive and the occlusion of their activism. Such a designation is not only related to the dominant conceptualizations of the public sphere but also embedded in colonial discourse. What follows is a discussion of forms of activism that challenge dominant ideas of what constitutes political activism and stereotypes of South Asian women's passivity. It explores the existence of a multi-sited political agency that is particularly relevant for an understanding of South Asian women's political agency.

**South Asian women and political activism**

Julia Sudbury comments on the multiple sites of political activism occupied by black people:

In examining black people's actions and decisions as voters, as politicians and as participants of grassroots organisations, they [studies of black political organizations and institutions] have shown that black people are active agents for change[[17]](#endnote-17).

Sudbury's work goes some way towards expanding the boundaries of the conception of political activism with regards to black women's organizations that are viewed as being at the forefront of empowering women. Within an analysis of contemporary theories of racism and racialization, Sudbury examines how women become politically mobilized. She goes on to challenge dominant conceptualizations of political activism and demonstrates that a form of less visible political agency exists simultaneously with the more recognized forms through elections, political parties and trade unions.

When considering the political activity of South Asian women and their negotiations with political, economic and social structures, it is useful to highlight a number of factors that need to be taken into consideration. These are the length of residence in Britain; political activism in the country of origin; acquisition of citizenship rights; positioning within and links to a community. In Britain there are established communities from the Indian subcontinent that have both citizenship rights and have developed their involvement in local, grassroots and official party politics[[18]](#endnote-18). The involvement of women is also evident from the earlier writings of black feminists that illustrate the range of black women's political activity: from industrial action to campaigning against racist legislation (the ‘SUS’ law), immigration laws and domestic violence. Such campaigns for change have emerged from black women's experiences, the starting point of which is the community, stretching to the wider domain through which alliances and coalitions have been made. Examples of coalitions among black women include the Organisation of Women of African and Asian Descent (OWAAD), the Black Lesbian Group, Brixton Black Women's Group, and Brent Asian Women's Refuge. The political activities of black women have demonstrated in the past how they have engaged and negotiated power relations in the community, home and society[[19]](#endnote-19).

The work of organizations such as SBS and the Newham Asian Women's Project in the field of immigration legislation, domestic violence and anti-racism has raised the public profile of South Asian women. These organizations also provide a network; thus SBS (originally a mixed organization of African-Caribbean and South Asian women) has been able to make coalitions with other women's organization (African-Caribbean, white and Asian), and the civil and human rights movements[[20]](#endnote-20).

This was evident in the high-profile case of Kiranjit Aluwahlia, which received extensive media coverage[[21]](#endnote-21). It also illustrates that ‘activism within the Asian women's movement, and within the wider women's movement, was at a high point at the time. SBS and Justice for Women (JFW) organized large demonstrations and public meetings well attended by women and the media.’[[22]](#endnote-22) The coalitions and the names of organizations suggest that South Asian women are part of the overall feminist movement, but, because some of the issues are specific to South Asian women, Siddiqui uses the term Asian women's movement. However, it is equally important to retain the concept ‘black feminism’ because often closure can occur through identity politics[[23]](#endnote-23). South Asian women, as part of the women's movement described by Siddiqui, have been shown to act on their own behalf and for others. The question here is: what are the enabling factors leading women into organized feminist activism? South Asian women's political activism stems from gendered racialized inequalities. It is through ‘action’ or agency that social change can be instigated.

Indeed, black feminist concerns are a combination of issues in terms of the consequences of different oppressive mechanisms for black women. The second-wave feminist movement of the seventies could not adequately address the interlocking systems of oppression—'race', class, gender, and heterosexism. Nevertheless, second-wave feminism fundamentally challenged what was seen as political. With the introduction of politics into the private sphere, through the slogan ‘the personal is political’, feminism challenged and destabilized the link between women and the private sphere *and* that between politics and the public sphere. Feminist thought provided a sustained critique of this issue through ‘consciousness raising groups’ and by transforming private experiences into public political forums. The private sphere shifted from being regarded as apolitical to becoming a focal point of political analysis. The relationship between the private and the public is premised on the idea that individuals' lives are situated within specific historical and social environments. These conditions directly contribute to human experience and how we come to understand them. The premise of feminist thought is that women's experiences have developed through the political, economic and social structures of society, and thereby revealed that the structure of society was one of inequality[[24]](#endnote-24).

Feminism as a body of theory has gone through many different phases, developing in different directions, and in the process it has blurred the conceptual and political distinction between the public and the private. Thus, it may be pertinent to think of the distinction between the public and the private as ideological: after all, men and women occupy both the public and the private. As a plural movement, however, second-wave feminism accomplished the task of politicizing every aspect of women's lives.

The work of high-profile feminists within various political traditions serves to illustrate the focal points of feminist activity, i.e. oppression and patriarchal power[[25]](#endnote-25). Additionally, feminism has developed different explanations to understand women's experiences, and it would therefore be more appropriate to state that a range of ‘feminisms’ have developed over time. However, the shared belief in the universal oppression of women by white western feminists failed to acknowledge differences of racial identity. The lack of acknowledgement of differences, race blindness, and the exclusion of black women provided the catalyst for a repudiation of ethnocentric theories advanced by white feminists. In this context the failure of white feminists to acknowledge other dimensions and relations of power has resulted in critiques by black feminists. The critiques offer a more critical insight into the Othering process, claimed by white feminists[[26]](#endnote-26).

Black feminists' critiques of the Othering process demonstrate the ways in which white feminists are able to construct black women as ‘other Others’[[27]](#endnote-27). The objectification of black women in the west and the Third World is evident in earlier writings that present Other women as victims of oppressive and brutal patriarchal practices[[28]](#endnote-28). These accounts reproduce Orientalist discourses of the past concerning practices such as *sati* (widow immolation) and contribute to the production of a contemporary discursive environment in which South Asian women are positioned as passive and without agency. Commenting on the process of objectification of black women, Chandra Talpade Mohanty states:

Third World women, on the other hand, never rise above the debilitating generality of the ‘object’ status. While radical and liberal feminist assumptions of women as a sex class might elucidate (however inadequately) the autonomy of particular women's struggles in the West, the application of the notion of women as a homogeneous category to women in the third world colonizes and appropriates the pluralities of the simultaneous location of different groups of women in social class and ethnic frameworks; in doing so it ultimately robs them of their historical and political *agency*. (Original emphasis)[[29]](#endnote-29)

Thus, if black women never rise above the status of objectification, what can we say about their political agency? Although generalizations of the variety of feminisms should be avoided, categories such as ‘western’, ‘white’ or ‘black’ as political identities can be retained as tools of analysis. Therefore, black feminism will be used as both a conceptual category and a form of social practice to identify black women's experiences of their history, location, colonialism, racism and sexism. The narratives of the women participants in this research will be used to demonstrate that it is the dual modalities of racism and sexism that have provided the springboard for their activism. One participant stated the following concerning racism:

*The main problem that an Asian woman could suffer from in this country is alienation and isolation and [the refuge] is based on the premise that Asian women suffer from double discrimination, that of sexism and racism. That is the whole ethos that [the Asian Women's Project] is built on. This is a hostile country, a racist and a hostile country.*

(Neesha, Asian Women's Project)

In addition to issues of racism and sexism, Benedict Anderson's (1983) conception of ‘imagined community’ as a political definition can be used to illustrate the emergence of ‘imagined communities of women with divergent histories and locations, woven together by the political threads of opposition to forms of domination that are not only pervasive but also systemic’[[30]](#endnote-30). The political threads of opposition have been demonstrated by the ability of black and South Asian women in Britain to organize against and resist forms of domination—state racism, victim status in white feminism, and sexism within the community[[31]](#endnote-31). They have avoided being robbed of political agency and as active agents have empowered themselves in opposition to dominant sexist and racist discourses. The concepts of ‘empowerment’ and ‘resistance’ are central with reference to the political activities of South Asian women against racism and sexism.

**Empowerment and resistance**

Empowerment consists of the development and awareness of several interrelated components: equality, rights and opportunities, capacity building, skills development, control/power over decision making, and overcoming discrimination[[32]](#endnote-32). Thus, participation in politics in whichever form could be considered a partial act of empowerment. The empowerment process can be collective and/or individual involving the ability to organize, to act and to instigate social change. Although empowerment is a contested issue, Patricia Hill Collins describes empowerment as a physical and psychic process of self-definition. She states:

Becoming empowered through self-knowledge even within conditions that severely limit one's ability to act, is essential […] Because our actions change the world from one in which we merely exist to one over which we have some control, they enable us to see everyday life as being in process and therefore amenable to change. By persisting in the journey toward self-definition we are changed, and this change empowers us[[33]](#endnote-33).

Collins' process of self-definition is particularly relevant with reference to the impact of gender, ‘race’ and class. She states: ‘this journey toward self-definition has political significance’[[34]](#endnote-34) and its relevance cannot be underestimated. Yet the question remains: where can these actions which instigate social change occur? Is it enough to act individually or is it more beneficial to act collectively as an organization? Collins' examples of empowerment range from individual acts, such as song writing, singing and literature, to collective acts through organizations and groups. These actions can be understood as a rejection of a dominant ideology, which objectifies black women as the ‘other Other’. This was the charge levelled against western feminist conceptualizations of black women.

If political participation and politicization are regarded as acts of empowerment in the self-definition process, it follows that forms of action are required. Thus, the ability ‘to act’ in the face of oppression requires an understanding of women as active agents; in other words, women with agency. Julia Sudbury comments on empowerment:

For the organisations studied, the idea of personal empowerment of black women featured as a common theme. Empowerment was seen as encompassing a broad range of practical and emotional issues which I have grouped around three themes: self-confidence, education and economic development. The first area was the most commonly mentioned[[35]](#endnote-35).

The three themes outlined by Sudbury refer to self-confidence in domestic violence situations; education with reference to black history and assertiveness training; and economic development, which refers to escape routes out of poverty through employment and entrepreneurial skills. She argues that personal empowerment needs to be viewed *alongside* participation in collective action to instigate social change.

Empowerment is often used in connection with women and it involves the contested term ‘power’. Sociological debates have revolved around the meaning of the term, from ‘power over’, which implies control over a person or groups of people[[36]](#endnote-36), to ‘power to’, ‘power from within’, and ‘power with’. These last three meanings of power are considered to be generative, whereas the ‘power over’ meaning can involve domination through overt coercion *and* subtle psychological processes. The understanding of ‘power over’ is exemplified in Amina Mama's study of black women's subjectivity[[37]](#endnote-37). She shows that, for some of the women whom she interviewed, their identity had been forged through a ‘colonial-integrationist discourse’. Mama designates this as a kind of internalized oppression/colonialism or a ‘dependency complex’.[[38]](#endnote-38) The following is a description of ‘Mona’ in Amina Mama's study, which emphasizes the impact of a ‘colonial-integrationist discourse’. It illustrates how a discourse can have ‘power over’ black people through their experiences in a society:

Colonial-integrationist discourse conveys a message of conformity and an acceptance of white hegemony […] As a child, Mona, a British-born black child, wished to conform to the dominant order as symbolised by the ‘Bisto-ad. Father’ carving the Sunday joint. In wishing for her family to conform to the hegemonic idea of a nuclear family with particular gender roles and customs, we can now say that Mona is recalling her position in colonial-integrationist discourse.[[39]](#endnote-39)

Internalized oppression is also evident in the high suicide rates amongst South Asian women. Statistics for South Asian women are higher than any other group within the 15–25 age range and is increasingly becoming a concern for health and social care organizations.[[40]](#endnote-40) Research has been carried out by Asian women's organizations in an attempt to uncover the reasons for these high rates of suicide. These organizations, and others in supportive roles such as counselling and training, provide us with information about a group of women whose agency is questioned, particularly through undertaking acts such as self-harm.[[41]](#endnote-41) This makes the task of presenting Asian women as having a positive sense of themselves more difficult. Instead, they can come to be seen as women who have internalized their oppression. However, alongside the figures showing the high rates of suicide and self-harm among South Asian women, such women also have a long history of autonomous organization.[[42]](#endnote-42) This suggests that the picture is far more complex than any simple or singular pattern of ‘internalized oppression’.

The implication of the ‘power over’ conceptualization as described above is that there is a finite supply of power. Therefore, some people have less power than others and a feminist understanding would position women as less powerful than men. If this is carried to its logical conclusion then the act of empowering women, through consciousness raising, represents a threat to those who hold power, in so far as it may result in a reversal of power relations. South Asian women's involvement in organizations that can empower them is often regarded as a threat to the internal dynamics of the South Asian community. This is evident in the following statement by one of the participants working for an organization specifically for South Asian women:

*Men have been determined to close down the organisation […] To be thought of as a homewrecking organisation or pulling families apart is completely stupid. We aren't the cause of domestic violence. What we also offer is actually training courses, so if someone comes to us and visits the resource centre, no one knows that the person is coming because of domestic violence. It could be because she wants to study English.*

(Kanwal, Asian Women's Project)

Kanwal highlights not only the threat to men's power but also how organizations for South Asian women can offer an alternative to being the victim of domestic violence through the generative process of empowerment skills. A generative form of power is one that can create new opportunities for women because ‘power is both the source of oppression in its abuse and the source of emancipation in its use’[[43]](#endnote-43) whatever the complex of social, familial and psychological factors. Some women enjoy seeing other women achieve and reach their full potential. Such pleasure was certainly evident among those women who worked in refuges and experienced women suffering from what has been described as ‘internalized oppression’ through being casualties of domestic violence. Other examples include empowering women with knowledge so that they are able to negotiate with those in positions of authority. The following are examples of narratives from this research in which empowerment is conceptualized as a generative process. This can be described as ‘the power some people have of stimulating activity in others and raising their morale’.[[44]](#endnote-44)

*Empowerment is not only education but the women acquiring skills so that they can question society.*

(Surin and Maria, Asian Women's Project)

*[My job description] says it is empowering young people within a social and recreational context. For example if I am taking a young woman to see a councillor, it is a form of empowerment. This is the way to get what you want, I'm not actually going to do it for you, you do it but let's go through a process before we get there. From the feedback I get, that's how I evaluate empowerment and say that I have empowered that young person.*

(Sonya, Youth Project)

*The satisfying element of my work is that quite often we are able to settle a number of our clients back into the community to lead independent lives.*

(Zainab, Asian Women's Project)

*We aim to change a woman's quality of life. It never ceases to amaze me because when she comes through there, she wants to die. Give her fifteen days and she becomes stronger, some of them go on to have careers. At the end of the day we help them and my job satisfaction is that I have given a woman the chance to change her life.*

(Neesha, Asian Women's Project)

*I actually wanted to help Asian women, I wanted to promote the kind of services that are around and have the kind of mechanisms and structures whereby they can access them. Where there aren't services, I wanted to be part of a movement to create services. When I talk about empowerment, it's not about grand conferences and seminars or sending stuff out and asking women to come to the seminars. It's about the little things as well. When we help women fill in forms, I don't do it and just get them to sign it. No it's actually about sitting down with the woman saying, have you actually seen a form like this? Do you know what kind of questions they are asking you? It is time consuming but it is also educational for the women when they go to places like the DSS.*

(Sofia, Asian Women's Project)

Power used in the sense conveyed in these statements shows how refuge workers do not lose any of *their* power through the empowerment process; rather, we could say that this form of power generates more power. In other words, women involved in the kind of political action represented by self-help groups construct their work objectives in terms of a narrative of ‘help’ and ‘uplift’. The women ‘being helped’ are presented as being lifted out of the state of ‘internalized oppression’ as a result of their experiences. Some feminist theory draws on the Foucauldian understanding of power as relational and multiple and its existence relies on the moments it is exercised within social relationships. Thus, power is seen as ‘a mode of action upon action’.[[45]](#endnote-45) Therefore, in the quotes above it is possible to view the participants' actions as a form of generative power because the providers (the ‘helpers’) feel empowered. This form of empowerment provides them with a further capacity for agency. Therefore, they have the ability to further a mode of action and self-definition, even if this is slight by the standards of a project of transformation. This generative power can be thought of as subversive of hegemonic assumptions and webs of social relations in which the users are located. This is never a completed or finished process but a move in an interactive cycle of contestation and self-definition.

So far, the discussion has drawn attention to: firstly, how there has been a broadening of feminist theory through the challenges to the racist constructions of black womanhood; secondly, the conceptualizations of power that allow South Asian women's activism to be visible; thirdly, the approaches to thinking about how political spaces can be created for activism and how this is related to the process of self-definition. However, we also need to relate these to political agency. Therefore, if power is associated with resistance, an assumption is that resistance comes to be viewed as the result of domination or oppression. Resistance conceptualized as the opposite of domination means that it is quite possible to see concrete acts of resistance as defiance of authority. From this perspective it is tenable to view visible forms of resistance such as industrial action or strikes as the measure of agency.[[46]](#endnote-46) Another application of resistance is the case of black consciousness that changed the meaning of black to a positive concept through organized struggle and resistance. Stuart Hall comments:

Black could not be converted to ‘black is beautiful’ simply by wishing it so. It had to become part of an organised practice of struggles requiring the building up of black resistance as well as the development of new forms of black consciousness.[[47]](#endnote-47)

On resistance which is not so easily recognizable or visible, Steve Pile argues that resistance can also operate subtly in other spaces, not defined by those in authority and thus more difficult to control. He states on the domination–resistance link:

Thus, it is no longer sufficient to assume that resistance arises from innate political subjectivities which are opposed to, or marginalised by, oppressive practices; whereby those who benefit from relations of domination act to reproduce them, while the oppressed have a natural interest in over-turning the situation. Instead, resistant political subjectivities are constituted through positions taken up not only in relation to authority—which may well leave people in awkward, ambivalent, down-right contradictory and dangerous places—but also through experiences which are not so quickly labelled ‘power’.[[48]](#endnote-48)

The process of thinking about alternatives and resistance is captured in the following statement by bell hooks:

Our living depends on our ability to conceptualize alternatives, often improvised. Theorizing about this experience aesthetically, critically is an agenda for radical cultural practice. For me this space of radical openness is a margin—a profound edge. Locating oneself there is difficult yet necessary. It is not a ‘safe’ place. One is always at risk. One needs a community of resistance.[[49]](#endnote-49)

Both Pile and hooks highlight the necessity of decolonizing the mind of the internalized oppression/colonialism discussed in the empowerment section. It is a move away from associating political identities with forms of resistance that are obvious, towards the idea of subjectivities and the multiplicity of experiences and power.

The writings of black British feminists from the seventies to the present illustrate the response to oppression through changing forms of resistance, and to changes in structural relations of power and identity. Earlier writing has involved calling on collective and essentialized forms of identity based on common experiences. Although there are many critiques of essentialism, it is recognized that essentialized identities can mobilize women. However, it can influence the uncritical adoption of a static identity. It is the challenge to universal forms of identity that bell hooks states ‘can open up new possibilities for the construction of the self and the assertion of agency’.[[50]](#endnote-50) Agency therefore needs to be viewed not only as resistance to oppression but also as a proactive force.[[51]](#endnote-51) The proactive force of agency is evident in some of the women's narratives in this research, as the following statement made by a law graduate indicates:

*It was a conscious decision, one, because I had actually read about [it] before I even applied to the Asian Women's Project, so I knew something about it. I knew they were pro-active and they did a lot of good work, and they publicized themselves. I thought I'd like to be with that sort of organization that's continually growing and expanding. They've done a lot of research, taking on different aspects of the Asian community, not just domestic violence. I wanted to work for an organization like that.*

(Kanwal, Asian Women's Project)

Kanwal offers a rationalized reason for her desire to become part of an organization that was involved in promoting social change amongst the South Asian community. She has also recognized the differences in experience amongst South Asian women.

In light of the discussion above on empowerment and resistance, a pertinent question to ask in relation to women's agency is: what factor enables women to act on their own behalf and for others? Organized feminist activism in which women ‘act’ to bring about social change is not restricted to the binary of active and passive status. Instead, we need to view it as a liberating active social force. Therefore, gender inequality and the binary of active men versus passive/victim women can no longer serve as an adequate explanation, particularly with the emergence of newer types of ‘autonomy and constraint’.[[52]](#endnote-52)

Despite the complexity and difficulties associated with the nature of agency, it is possible to offer an insight into what has been described as ‘the dialectic of stasis and change within gender identity and its implications for a theory of agency’.[[53]](#endnote-53) For McNay, a reformulation of agency is accompanied by a variety of ways in which women can resist, subvert and claim an identity that is emancipatory. However, identity has been conceptualized within a ‘negative paradigm’ of subject formation.[[54]](#endnote-54) If identity is viewed through the ‘negative paradigm’: that is, if the subject is thought to be formed through an act of constraint (resistance to oppression), it provides an inadequate understanding of agency. In other words, a wider understanding of political agency is required in order to move beyond the symbolic and discursive construction of subjectivity that assumes the passive nature of a subject. McNay argues that a ‘generative account of subjectification and agency’, similar to the generative aspects of power (‘power to’, ‘power from within’, ‘power with’) is necessary. This has been central in this article that has examined the political agency of South Asian women in a British context.

**Conclusion**

The objective of this article was to investigate the perceived idea that South Asian women were not likely to be involved in politics; to understand how their experiences and the interpretations of identity feed into their political agency; and to unravel some of the complexities involved in the construction of political agency.

This article has attempted to trace part of the theoretical journey that feminism has made in the understanding of women's political agency and activism. Through an extension of the boundaries of political activism South Asian women within grassroots-level organizations have shown the capacity to instigate social change. There has been a gradual rise of black women's organizations and the growth of this organizational infrastructure suggests that political mobilization has been in response *not only* to issues such as domestic violence and education *but also* to state racism, especially in connection with immigration legislation. At a policy level, South Asian women's organizations and women involved in work with South Asian or minority ethnic women indicate the levels of involvement and the depth of problems they face and deal with. More positively, it also suggests that South Asian women have set up structures to challenge dominant discourses.

South Asian women can become empowered and resist oppression through political mobilization. However, empowerment and resistance presupposes domination or oppression and the consequences of this is that visible forms of resistance come to be seen as the only measure of agency. Recent studies on black women's organizations suggest that agency needs to be re-theorized away from a masculinist discourse and within the confines of the Marxist dichotomy of structure/agency towards a wider understanding.[[55]](#endnote-55) Indeed, South Asian women's involvement in the political process has been recognized as they have openly contested religious and cultural values, although feminists have often been slow to recognize their agency.[[56]](#endnote-56)

South Asian women have maintained an active struggle against the oppression of women by their own communities who have remained silent over issues of gender even though their involvement in the fight against racial oppression has been encouraged. The involvement of South Asian women in struggles against racial and gender oppression poses a challenge to the image of docility and passivity prevalent in historical discourses. It also indicates that day-to-day living represents a site of political struggle. It has been argued that if the participation of South Asian women is limited within formal structures, their participation at grassroots level represents political agency. The recognition of political agency with an emphasis on multiple sites of political activism is considered to be crucial in the conceptual shift from regarding South Asian women as lacking in agency.

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